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ABSTRACT

Since high school forensics workshops play an important role in the total educational forensics scene, forensics directors and administrators should examine and evaluate their schools' workshops in the light of the changes which should be made. In order to do this, a student-centered philosophical base should be established and four external and four internal factors should be considered. External factors involve the goals of the workshop, the staff, the students' financial costs, and workshop advertising and publicity. Internal factors concern the competitive nature of workshops, student research, individual instruction, and staff-student content. (JM)

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Proposed Standards for High School Forensics Workshops: Functional Service for Student Participants

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Proposed Standards for High School Forensics Workshops: Functional Service for Student Participants[1]

At the 1972 Speech Communication Association Convention in Chicago, an action caucus was held to develop a statement of philosophy and objectives for the operation of high school forensics workshops.[2] The proposals and recommendations growing out of that discussion were concretized and published in the leading journal of forensics thought,[3] but their impact upon the forensics community has been minimal, and the status quo has remained virtually unchanged. The recommendations of the 1972 conference were designed to foster further discussion, perhaps leading to the creation of a high school forensics workshop "code" similar to the existant AFA code for intercollegiate forensics activities. Unfortunately, the 1972 recommendations have received but benign neglect in the three years following their espousal.

However, it must be remembered that high school forensics workshops play an important part in the total educational forensics picture: they are national in both existence and scope; they are hosted by some of the nation's leading colleges and universities; they provide instruction to several thousand high school students yearly; and the annual support costs run into many thousands of dollars. Therefore, the examination of such workshops cannot and should not be easily pushed aside. Their significant existence requires continual study and appraisal.

Realizing, as does Professor Donald G. Douglas of the University of Washington, that "forensic directors can no longer avoid taking into account the call for sweeping educational change in determining the specific programs for future forensic education,"[4] all administrators, regardless of bureaucratic level, must carefully examine their school's workshops in light of educational needs. The following material is offered as possible criteria for the makeup of such an examination.

The Philosophical Base

The philosophical underpinning of a high school forensics workshop must be the concept that the workshop exists as a service, a functional service, for the students taking part in the workshop. That is, decisions regarding staffing, costs, materials, curriculum - in short, all important policy decisions must be made with the students as the focal point of the decision-making process itself.

Of course, all workshop directors would give assent (lip service) to such a philosophical statement. However, when decisions are made on answers to such questions as "How do I find a job for this summer?" and "I wonder where I can pick up a few easy bucks?", there is a serious question as to the pedagogical intent of the workshop. Instead, workshops should be grounded upon such questions as:

(1) Is there a need for a workshop in this area?

(2) Can my school provide the necessary facilities to support a workshop?

(3) Can an adequate staff be assembled for the workshop?

Such questions provide the answers necessary for the determination of whether or not to begin/continue a workshop, and, most importantly, those types of questions are student-centered, resting upon the philosophy that forensics workshops should be functionally geared to student needs and interests. While it is true that summer workshops serve as an effective future-student recruitment device and as an additional source of income for workshop faculty, the rationale for the hosting of the workshop should not be based upon these fringe benefits. Workshops should be designed for the students to be served.

External Factors

After the establishment of the student-oriented philosophical base, there are four external factors that should be considered in the construction of a high school

forensics workshop. As a group, these factors operate outside the actual functioning of the workshop itself but are critical to it.

First, the workshop must be pertinent to the overall educational experiences of the high school forensics student. It would be unfortunate if Pruett's discovery that seventeen percent (17%) of the 1970 University of Georgia's workshop participants who did not feel the workshop helped in their overall educational development were generalizable to all high school forensics workshops.[5] The workshop must be relevant to the past and future forensics experiences of the students. Anderson and Matlon's national survey of high school programs revealed that "High school forensic programs are essentially contest oriented....With few exceptions, high school forensics programs concentrate solely or primarily upon preparing students for formal contests or festivals."[6] Thus, to be relevant to the high school forensics program, the workshop will be competitive in nature - an important factor that has implications for internal factors within the functioning of the workshop.

Second, great care must be given to the selection of the staff who will teach at the workshop. As Sinzinger has noted, "the experience and competence of the staff will determine the quality of instruction and training provided by the institute."[7] Therefore, potential staff members must be closely assessed to determine their viability for workshop instructional purposes. The staff must be able to work with high school students and to be committed to the philosophical base of the primacy of serving the student participants. The 1972 recommendation that "the primary concern of the staff should be to serve students, not to obtain a summer position"[8] should serve as the guidepost for staff selection.

It must be remembered that either (a) being an intercollegiate debater, or (b) being an intercollegiate debate/forensics coach does not inherently qualify an individual for a high school forensics workshop staff position. The types of

population being served are vastly different. It must also be remembered that a large, successful high school forensics program does not necessarily mean that that program's coach is an effective teacher. Sometimes programs grow and prosper despite the carryings-on of their coaches. In short, more careful staff selection must be made than at present to assure top-quality personnel for the benefit of student participants.

Third, the financial costs to the student must be stringently monitored and controlled. All too often workshop directors have looked upon their programs as "fast buck" operations, wherein a minimum of effort will garner a sizeable amount of money. Over-staffing, unnecessary frills, mysterious surcharges, etc. add up to higher tuition and fee costs that must be borne by the students. Most workshop students have to make a significant sacrifice to attend our institutes. They should be assured that everything for which they pay is of necessity to their functional workshop training.

Matlon and Shoen have suggested that a thirteen dollars per day ($13/day) cost to the student is the maximum amount that can be charged the student.[9] With that as a realistic guideline, the average two-week workshop should attempt to hold fees below $150, including all necessary charges for tuition, insurance, housing, meals, and materials.

Fourth, high school forensics workshops should be honestly and clearly described in all advertising and publicity packages and brochures. Sinzinger has suggested that such brochures should include a description of the program, the purpose of the program, the total cost, the areas of instruction, the staff, the method of training, and application procedures.[10] Certainly, this suggested list is quite sound in supplying the types of information that workshop publicity should include. Beyond that, moreover, brochures and publicity packages should be finitely

accurate in describing the construction and activities of the workshop. Purported benefits of workshop attendance should be carefully screened to assure realism and validity. High school forensics workshops have been notorious for spurious post hoc causal fallacies that assert workshop attendance has been the reason for later competitive success. As with coaching, some of our students do well in spite of our workshop instruction.

In all cases, we must deliver that which we promise in our advertising. Workshop students make great personal and financial sacrifices to attend our institutes; we owe it to them to keep our promises or not to make them at all.

Internal Factors

Having now described four critical external factors of high school forensics workshops, we may turn our attention to the internal operations of the workshops themselves. It is within this area, the internal factors, that most complaints about workshops arise, and it is within this area that more of our efforts need to be channeled to assure functional service to the student participants. Again, four major factors warrant consideration.

First, it is imperative that our high school forensics workshops de-emphasize the importance of "winning" -- especially winning at all costs. While it is most certainly true that forensics is an inherently competitive activity with "winners" and "losers," we must take steps to put the competitive nature of the activity into better balance. Trophies, medals, and certificates are pleasant rewards for successful forensics involvement, but they are not the substantive benefits to be gained from such involvement. Years after the trophies have begun to tarnish and old debates begin to fade in memory, more lasting benefits will still remain strong: increased communicative ability; improved powers of critical thinking; personality development; personal friendships -- these are far more important.

The recent concern over perversions of evidence, "trick" debate cases, and questionable ethical strategic ploys stem, in large part, from our all-encompassing desire to win, to be first, to be the champion. High school forensics workshops must teach our students that winning is important only if held in balance with long-term goals and ethical methods. To want to win requires that one also be able to lose. Unfortunately, our workshops tend only to emphasize the former while castigating the latter, thereby providing an unrealistic and damaging view of forensics competition.

Second, high school forensics workshops should mandate the student research of evidence -- at least as much as is feasible given the limitations of time and research facilities.[11] The dumping of hundreds of pieces of debate evidence upon the students by the workshop staff is to be avoided. Research that is mainly an exercise of cutting and pasting materials from handbooks and prepared evidence packages must also be avoided.

While the use of supportive documentation is an essential part of policy decision-making, it must be remembered that evidence is but a tool of the persuasive process, not its end. One must seriously question the value of giving each debate student one thousand pieces of evidence on the first day of the workshop - something that has occurred at one workshop in the past. The student gains nothing from such a system as this: he does not improve research skills; he does not really benefit from the evidence as he is not able to place it in context. This type of so-called research activity must be halted.

Third, high school forensics workshops should operate to maximize individual instruction, a point affirmed by Matlon and Shoen: "Workshop faculties should be large enough to provide students with maximum individual attention. If wisely used, a student-faculty ratio of 10:1 is desirable.[12]

The factor of student-faculty contact is one that provides great hassles for workshop directors. Often, a dilemma is created: to hold costs down, fewer staff are recruited which results in lessened individual contact. On the other hand, more individualized instruction may require more staff personnel which, in turn, means higher workshop costs to be borne by the students. Perhaps a viable mechanism for escaping this dilemma is the use of modular scheduling, a device that divides students into relatively small groups that operate on differing daily schedules. Thus, while one group has a free period for colleague discussion, another group has an intensive session with a staff member. Modular scheduling allows for increased personnel contact with students without having to increase the number of staff.

Fourth, great care must be given to the staff-student contact that is developed within the operations of the high school forensics workshop. Specifically, permanently assigning a group of students to one staff member throughout the course of the workshop should be discouraged in that such assignment creates two severe problems. Permanent responsibility often creates the impression that "these are my students" for the staff member, leading to divisive and counterproductive personal competition between faculty and students. To assure his students' success, the staff member may overstep the bounds of functional instruction, actually becoming a workshop participant in researching evidence and writing debate cases. The purpose of the workshop is to aid the student, not to assuage the ego of every staff member.

Additionally, permanent assignment of staff denies the students the benefit of drawing upon the varied ideas and points of view available from all staff personnel. Workshop instruction should be a time of testing and experimentation of many ideas and approaches, not just the one advanced by one controlling staff member. Only by rotating staff assignments will the students benefit from their intensive workshop experience.

Regardless of one's agreement or disagreement with the ideas offered within this paper, it is hoped that the overriding philosophy will prevail: high school forensics workshops should provide functional service to the student participants. Accordingly, we must take steps to assure that that is being engendered by the fifty-odd workshops in existence. We must be absolutely certain that our workshops operate to serve the needs and interests of the students. Continual discussion and appraisal are necessary; this paper was designed to enhance that discussion and to urge immediate, vigilant evaluation of existant high school forensics workshops.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Prepared for the Speech Communication Association Convention, December 27-30, 1975.

[2]"The Development of a Philosophy and Objective Statement for High School Workshops," J.E. Sayer and John W. Monsma, chairmen.

[3]John W. Monsma and James E. Sayer, "Report of Action Caucus on High School Workshops," Journal of the American Forensic Association, X (Fall, 1973), 111-113.

[4]Donald G. Douglas, "Toward A Philosophy of Forensic Education," Journal of the American Forensic Association, VIII (Summer, 1971), 36.

[5]Robert Pruett, "The Student's Perception of the Effects of A Summer High School Debate Institute," Journal of the American Forensic Association, IX (Summer, 1972), 280.

[6]Betty Anderson and Irene Matlon, "A Description of High School Forensic Programs: Report on a National Survey," Journal of the American Forensic Association, X (Winter, 1974), 125.

[7]Richard A. Sinzinger, "Selecting A Forensics Institute: Pitfalls and Benefits," Journal of the American Forensic Association, IX (Spring, 1973), 465.

[8]Monsma and Sayer, p. 113.

[9]Ronald J. Matlon and Richard L. Shoen, "Administration of Summer High School Debate Workshops: A National Poll," Journal of the American Forensic Association, X (Spring, 1974), 221.

[10]Sinzinger, p. 464.

[11]This is consonant with the recommendations of the 1972 conference. See Monsma and Sayer, p. 113.

[12]Matlon and Shoen, p. 222.